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A N S W E R S

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Catholic Answers

20 Answers
-
The New Testament

Jimmy Akin



20 Answers: The New Testament

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Introduction

For Christians, the New Testament represents not just God's word but the most important part of God's word. It tells the story of Jesus, the Savior of all mankind, and it is by far our most important source of knowledge about his life and teachings. In addition, the New Testament contains the earliest Christian writings after Jesus' death and resurrection, and they provide us with crucial information about the beginnings of the Church and the controversies and challenges that it faced.

The New Testament has had an enormous influence on the course of civilization around the world. With more than two billion Christians alive today, spread across every continent, it has made an impact in every land. Even non-Christians must learn something about it in order to have a truly complete education.

With the immense significance of the New Testament have come questions and controversies. Who wrote it, and when? How were its books selected? And how should it be interpreted? In this short volume we will look at the books of the New Testament, how they have come down to us, how reliable they are, and how we can learn from them.

This last point is crucial, for as interesting as some of the debates of a historical nature may be, the key point is that the New Testament is the divinely inspired record of the climax of divine revelation. For the Christian believer, it has a value that transcends historical interest. It represents the culmination of divine wisdom, it is a source of profound spiritual guidance and comfort, and its pages contain the message of eternal salvation.

1. What is the New Testament?

The New Testament is the collection of inspired books that are regarded as sacred and canonical by Christians.

Testament is another word for covenant—a type of solemn and binding agreement. Over the centuries, God has made a number of covenants, either with mankind as a whole, with a particular people, or with a particular individual.

Among the most famous is the one made through Israel's founding lawgiver, Moses. This covenant, which is described in the first five books of the Bible (Genesis-Deuteronomy), became the basis of Israel's national life and of the Jewish faith. The sacred books that were written as a result of this covenant are known as the books of the Old Testament.

However, the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah declared that one day God would institute a “new covenant” (Jer. 31:31), and Jesus announced the coming of this covenant on the night of his passion. When he instituted the Eucharist, he declared, “This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). The New Covenant—which makes salvation possible for all mankind—was then put into effect when he shed his blood on the cross.

Consequently, the books of the New Testament are the ones that deal with Jesus and the covenant God made through him.

This doesn't mean that the books of the Old Testament are irrelevant for Christians. Christianity builds on Judaism, and the books of the New Testament build on those of the Old. They are still God's inspired word and contain much valuable information. As St. Paul says, “They were written down for our instruction” (1 Cor. 10:11; cf. Rom. 15:4).

For the first Christians, before the New Testament was written, the books of the Old Testament simply *were* “the scriptures,” and the New Testament

quotes from and alludes to them hundreds of times. They do so not only to show that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies given in the Old Testament but also to reveal the character of God and to draw moral and theological lessons for Christians.

The New Testament itself contains twenty-seven books. They were written in the first century, in the decades following the ministry of Jesus (c. A.D. 29–33), and they fall into four general categories:

- Four of the books are known as Gospels and are biographies of Jesus Christ.
- One—the book of Acts—is a history that continues the story of the early Church from the time of Jesus to about the year A.D. 60.
- Twenty-one books take the form of letters (also called *epistles*) that were written to groups and individuals.
- Finally, one—the book of Revelation—is a work of prophecy.

2. How do we know that the text of the New Testament is accurate?

Given the age of the New Testament books, people sometimes ask how we know we have accurate texts.

Before the invention of the printing press in the 1400s, books had to be hand copied by scribes, who invariably made at least small mistakes. After centuries of hand copying, could serious errors have been introduced into the text? Could some even have been introduced deliberately?

Several factors worked to prevent this. The first is the fact that the books of the New Testament are considered sacred. This means scribes took great pains not to make mistakes when copying them and to quickly fix mistakes if they did.

Another major factor protecting the integrity of the manuscripts was the enormous number of copies that were made. We have almost six thousand manuscripts of the Greek New Testament before the first mechanically printed version of it appeared in 1516. We have thousands more manuscripts that are translations of the New Testament into languages like Latin, Coptic, and Syriac.

Modern scholars have recovered these manuscripts from places like monastery libraries and archaeological sites—especially in Egypt where the dry, desert conditions help preserve buried writing materials.

Many of these manuscripts date to very early times—the A.D. 200s and 300s—and some date even earlier. For example, we have part of the Gospel of John—in a manuscript known as the *Rylands Papyrus* or *P52*—that dates to around A.D. 140, just a few decades after this Gospel was written.

At this time, the original copies of the New Testament books—known as the *autographs*—were still in circulation. Recent studies of the Dead Sea Scrolls and ancient library practices have revealed that individual copies of

books remained in use for up to 500 years, though 150 years was more common.¹

This means that original copies of the New Testament books would have remained in use in the second and third centuries and able to influence copies made in this period, such as the Rylands Papyrus. In fact, the early Church Father St. Peter of Alexandria (died c. A.D. 311) mentions that in his day, the original copy of the Gospel of John “written by the hand of the evangelist” was still “preserved in the most holy church of Ephesus, and is there adored by the faithful” (Fragment 5:1:7).

In addition to the thousands of New Testament manuscripts that exist, we also have extensive quotations from it in the writings of Church Fathers and in lectionaries used in churches. Even if all of the manuscripts somehow vanished, we would be able to reconstruct the entire New Testament just from these sources.

This is an abundance of evidence compared to what we have for other works of ancient literature. For example, consider Julius Caesar’s popular autobiographical work *The Gallic Wars*, which was written about 50 B.C. We have only around 260 manuscripts of it, ten of which are in good condition, and the earliest of which dates 900 years after the original was written. This is tiny compared to the thousands of manuscripts and quotations from the New Testament.

Of course, scribes did make mistakes, but they were minor, and today scholars have a wealth of material they can use to establish what the original text of the New Testament was. A special science—known as *textual criticism*—has even developed to allow scholars to do this. And, while there are passages whose exact wording is debated, scholars are not in doubt that the texts we have are fundamentally accurate. There are too many independent and converging lines of evidence supporting it.

This also reveals how impossible it would have been for anyone to deliberately introduce false readings or suppress passages in the service of a

theological agenda. Even if someone wanted to, copies of the New Testament books were in too many hands.

If a heretical group wanted to alter a passage they objected to, they would never be able to go through the entire Christian world and get their coreligionists to take it out or alter it. Too many would refuse to do so, and it would have caused a huge theological dispute that we would have a record of. In addition, no one would have been able to change all the manuscripts that modern scholars have discovered but that at the time lay forgotten in monastery libraries or in archaeological sites.

The impossibility of deliberately changing the New Testament documents is illustrated by the fact that none of the manuscript variants that do exist would alter fundamental Christian doctrines. There are no manuscripts of the New Testament that endorse the views of heretics.

The evidence we possess provides no basis for challenging the fundamental reliability of the New Testament text.

3. Who wrote the New Testament?

Some of the documents of the New Testament explicitly name their authors. This happens in most of the letters.

The reason is that, at the time, it was customary for letters to begin with an address that took the form “X to Y,” where X was the sender and Y was the recipient. Thus the address of the letter of James reads, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1).

Almost all of the New Testament letters list their authors. Sometimes more than one author is indicated, as in 1 Thessalonians, which begins, “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess. 1:1). It is unusual for ancient letter writers to list coauthors, but Paul valued the contributions of his coworkers, like Silvanus and Timothy, and often lists them as coauthors.

At times the author of a letter was so well known to his readers that he didn’t name himself explicitly. This is the case with 2 and 3 John, where the sender simply identifies himself as “the Elder” (2 John 1; 3 John 1). The same is true of Hebrews and 1 John, where the author assumes that the readers know who he is and so does not identify himself.

Based on the attributions given in the letters themselves, the principal authors were Paul, James, Peter, “the Elder,” and Jude, along with Paul’s coauthors, including Silvanus, Timothy, and Sosthenes.

The only other book of the New Testament that explicitly names its author is Revelation, which has the same kind of address as a letter (Rev. 1:4) and identifies the sender as “John.”

The Gospels and Acts do not name their authors. The likely reason for this is that they are works of history, and they were being modeled on the Old Testament historical books, which also did not name their authors.

This does not mean that the original readers weren't expected to know who the authors were. Luke and Acts are addressed to an individual called Theophilus (Luke 1:3), who was likely the patron that underwrote the costs of producing these two books. Thus when the author says things like, "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1), Theophilus knew who was writing.

Similarly, the Gospel of John reveals that it was written by an eyewitness we refer to today as "the beloved disciple" because the text describes him as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:20; cf. John 21:24). The author also takes pains to debunk a rumor that he would not die before the Second Coming (John 21:21–23). He expects the original audience to know about this rumor and thus to know who he is.

Beyond the statements found in the New Testament documents themselves, we have evidence in the writings of the early Church Fathers, who add more information about who wrote them. Thus they state that the first three Gospels were written by the apostle Matthew, by Mark the companion of Peter, and by Luke the companion of Paul, who also wrote Acts.

In recent times, some skeptical scholars have doubted the accuracy of these attributions, as they have the attributions of some of the New Testament letters. However, the case for the traditional authors is strong.

The value of external testimony of this nature is not to be underestimated. Many ancient books did not name their authors. For purposes of comparison, Plato's most famous dialogue—*The Republic*—never mentions the name of its author. We know that it was written by Plato because of external testimony to this fact, and his authorship of the work is not doubted by scholars.

The authorship attributions of the Gospels are all very early and date to the first century. As the scholar Martin Hengel pointed out, as soon as the second Gospel was written, there was a need for them to be named so that

they could be distinguished from one another, and the method that was chosen was to name them after their authors.²

The external testimony regarding the authors of the New Testament is very strong. There are only a few cases where the early Church Fathers had any doubt about who wrote particular books.

For example, there was some question about who wrote the books attributed to John—whether some of them were written by John the apostle or by another eyewitness of Jesus named John the Elder. Thus St. Jerome mentions that many held 2 and 3 John were written by John the Elder,³ and Eusebius argues that it was the Elder rather than the apostle who wrote Revelation.⁴ Some recent authors have also held that John the Elder had a role in writing the Gospel of John.⁵

Regardless of these questions, it is certain that the New Testament books were written by first century figures who were either apostles (e.g., Matthew, Paul, Peter) or companions of the apostles (e.g., Mark, Luke, Timothy, John the Elder). They all count as among the group that Luke refers to as “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (Luke 1:2).

Ultimately, what is important is not the exact authorship of particular books. What counts is the fact that these books—like those of the Old Testament—are the inspired word of God (2 Tim. 3:16) and that they were received into the canon of Scripture by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). They are therefore authoritative for Christian faith.

4. What are the Gospels?

The four canonical Gospels are biographies of Jesus Christ. As Luke states, they record “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

Naturally, they were written according to the literary conventions that were employed in the first century. Because they stand in the same overall tradition as the books of the Old Testament, they have some elements in common with its historical books. However, they closely approximate the Greek style of biography, which is known as a *bios* (“life”). They thus can be compared to Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* or Suetonius’s *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*.

They are called *Gospels* rather than *Lives* because of the message that Jesus came to proclaim—“the gospel.” The Greek word for gospel (*euangelion*) originally meant “good news,” and in the first century it was often used to characterize royal decrees, such as the decrees of Augustus Caesar. These were held to be good news in that they were (theoretically) meant for the betterment of the Roman world.

However, when Jesus came, he began preaching “the gospel of the kingdom” of God (Matt. 4:23). This was the true good news that mankind had been awaiting—that the God of all creation had finally sent his Son to usher in his kingdom and make salvation possible. The gospel was so central to the teaching of Jesus that his entire ministry reflected it, and so the biographies that were written about him came to be called Gospels.

Like other ancient biographies of public figures, the Gospels do not focus much on his childhood and youth. Instead, they focus on his public ministry, which began shortly after John the Baptist launched his own ministry “in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar” (Luke 3:1) or A.D. 29.

They then describe the activities that characterized his ministry, including preaching and performing miracles, and they conclude by focusing on the

events leading up to his death and resurrection. Many ancient biographies focus on the death of the person they are written about, particularly if the death is thought to be instructive or important. It thus was natural for the Gospel authors to focus on Jesus' death and resurrection, for it was by these events that he made salvation possible.

Why are there four Gospels rather than one? Part of the answer has to do with the way ancient books worked. At the time, they had to be hand copied, and they were fantastically expensive. A single copy of a Gospel would cost the ancient equivalent of thousands of dollars to produce (which is why Luke would need a patron like Theophilus).

Because of the cost, books had to be short—typically just one scroll in length. Consequently, no single Gospel could record all of the things Jesus said and did. Thus John states, “there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25).

To preserve knowledge of different things Jesus did and taught, the four evangelists each wrote a Gospel. Since each of these is a biography of the same figure, they contain some overlap (e.g., accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection). This is similar to how the historical books of the Old Testament frequently parallel each other (e.g., the events of 1 Samuel and 2 Kings are paralleled in 1–2 Chronicles) to provide a supplemental perspective on the same happenings.

Since the earliest centuries, scholars have noted that three of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—recount Jesus' life in very similar ways. They are therefore called *synoptic* Gospels, because they give a common view of his ministry (Greek, *sun*: “together”; *opsis*: “seeing”).

The synoptic Gospels contain many passages that are almost word-for-word identical, and not just in the sayings of Jesus (which one might expect to be memorized). The narrative portions also are sometimes worded very similarly, which has led scholars from ancient times to speculate on how the

three are related to each other.

An early proposal known as the *Augustinian Hypothesis*, because it was proposed by St. Augustine, is that Matthew wrote first, Mark abbreviated Matthew, and then Luke wrote third.

Today the most popular proposal is known as the *Two-Document Hypothesis*. It holds that Mark wrote first and that Matthew and Luke independently expanded upon Mark using a second, hypothetical source called *Q* (from *Quelle*, the German word for “source”). According to this view, Mark and *Q* were the two documents on which Matthew and Luke were principally based.

In recent years, additional proposals have begun to gain popularity. These include:

- the Griesbach Hypothesis, which holds that Matthew wrote first, Luke used Matthew, and then Mark fused material from both,
- the Farrer Hypothesis, which holds that Mark wrote first, Matthew expanded on Mark, and then Luke used both, and
- the Wilke Hypothesis, which holds that Mark wrote first, Luke expanded on Mark, and then Matthew used both.

The Church does not have a teaching of which of these solutions to the synoptic problem—or another one—is true. It leaves this matter for scholars to discuss.

5. What is the Gospel of Matthew?

The Gospel of Matthew is the first book of the New Testament in canonical order—that is, the order in which it is found in a Bible.

Ancient authors are unanimous in attributing it to the apostle Matthew, who was an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry.

Some have pointed out that it clarifies that the tax collector whom Jesus converted was called *Matthew* (Matt. 9:9) and not only *Levi* (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27), reflecting the evangelist's preferred name for himself.

I have argued that it is unlikely that the name “Matthew” would have become attached to this Gospel if he hadn't written it. Matthew was not one of the most prominent apostles (note his placement in the list in Matt. 10:2–4; Mark 3:14–19; Luke 6:13–16; Acts 1:13), and he was a tax collector—a profession held in extremely low regard by Jewish people of the time (see Matt. 18:17). Yet Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels and is clearly written for an audience of Jewish Christians. Nobody would have attributed it to Matthew—a low-ranking apostle and tax collector—in an attempt to give it credibility with a Jewish audience. The evidence thus supports it having genuinely been written by Matthew.

Scholars are divided on the date at which Matthew was written. The most common view today is that it was written around A.D. 80–90. However, there is evidence it was written earlier.

The Gospel records that Jesus predicted the destruction of the Jewish temple (Matt. 24:2), but—unlike other occasions when Jesus' prophecies were fulfilled—it does not record that this happened in A.D. 70, suggesting that it was written before that date. In addition, it speaks as if the temple is still in operation, so that Jewish Christians need to be reconciled with their brethren before offering sacrifices there (Matt. 5:23–24; cf. Matt. 12:5; 23:20–21).

Further, in Matthew Jesus supports Jewish Christians paying the Jerusalem temple tax (Matt. 17:24–27). It is unlikely Matthew would have included this teaching in his Gospel if he were writing after A.D. 70. Once the temple was destroyed, the Roman authorities humiliated Jews by requiring them to pay this tax to support the temple of Jupiter Best and Greatest in Rome, which could inadvertently suggest that Jesus supported paying the tax to a pagan temple!

Beginning in the second century, many early authors held that Matthew was the first of the Gospels to be written, which could place it considerably before A.D. 70. However, this was likely an inference based on the fact that it was written for an audience of Jewish Christians, and the first believers were Jews. Based on various lines of evidence, most scholars today hold that Mark was written first, and my own estimate is that Matthew was written around A.D. 65.

A question also exists about the language in which Matthew was written. According to late first- or early second-century author Papias, “Matthew wrote the oracles [of the Lord] in the Hebrew language, and everyone interpreted them as he was able.”⁶ Consequently, many held that this Gospel was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic and then translated into Greek.

A large majority of modern scholars—both liberal and conservative—hold that Matthew was written in Greek, and some have misunderstood Papias. The Greek phrase he used for “in the Hebrew language” (*Hebradi dialektô*) could also mean “in the Hebrew style”—a reference to the fact that Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels.

Whatever its original language, Matthew is clearly written for an audience of Jewish Christians. It also has several other distinctive features, including:

- It begins with a genealogy tracing Jesus’ descent from David’s son Solomon (Matt. 1:1–17);
- It includes an account of Jesus’ birth, focusing on the role of Joseph as

- his foster father (Matt. 1:18–2:23); and
- It stresses Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Matt. 1:22; 2:5; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9).

Also, Matthew includes a large amount of Jesus' teaching, which is organized into five major discourses:

- A. The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1–7:29).
- B. The Missionary Discourse (Matt. 10:5–11:1).
- C. The Kingdom Parables (Matt. 13:1–53).
- B. The Church Discourse (Matt. 18:1–19:1).
- A. The Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:1–26:1).

These discourses are arranged in what scholars call a *chiastic* pattern, meaning that the elements in the pattern relate to each other like the steps of a pyramid or wedding cake. In this chiasmus, the A-discourses correspond to the major components of the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets, with the Sermon on the Mount representing Jesus' ethical teachings (the Law) and the Olivet Discourse representing his prophetic teachings (the Prophets). The B-discourses represent the Church's outward function (evangelization) and its inward function (relations among Christians). At the center is the C-discourse, a collection of parables concerning the mystery of the kingdom of God.

Despite its uniquely Jewish orientation, Matthew quickly became the most popular of the synoptic Gospels, as illustrated by the fact more manuscripts of it survive from the early centuries than Mark or Luke.⁷

6. What is the Gospel of Mark?

Mark is the second Gospel in canonical order, though today most scholars believe that it was the first to be written. It is the shortest of the four Gospels, which may have been one of the reasons that Matthew and Luke wrote: to provide a fuller account of Jesus' ministry and teachings.

Much of the material that appears in Mark also appears in Matthew and Luke. In particular, ninety percent of Mark is paralleled in Matthew. Mark thus has less unique material than the other Gospels. Perhaps for this reason, Mark was quickly overshadowed by them, and fewer copies of it survive from the early centuries.

Despite the fact that Mark was the least popular of the Gospels historically, it is of intense scholarly interest today, precisely because it is thought to be the earliest; and Mark is credited as having performed a great service to the Christian community by putting into writing the first account of Jesus' life and teachings to survive.

This also may be why we refer to these documents as *Gospels* rather than *Lives* of Jesus. Ancient books were often named based on their opening words, and Mark started his Gospel with the statement, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1:1). The word Gospel then became associated with biographies of Jesus, and when the other evangelists wrote, their works were called Gospels also.

Mark does not name himself in his Gospel, but the early Church Fathers are unanimous in attributing the Gospel to him. The first New Testament reference to Mark is in Acts 12:12, where we learn that his Jewish name was John and that his mother had a house in Jerusalem where Christians frequently met. Presumably, his father was deceased at this time. It is also likely that his father was a Roman citizen, explaining why his son had the Latin name *Marcus*. We also know that Mark was a cousin of the apostle Barnabas (Col. 4:10).

Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary Journey (Acts 13–14), but he turned back from the mission field at a certain point. Consequently, when Barnabas wanted to take Mark on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:40–18:22), Paul strongly objected. The contention between the two was so intense that they dissolved their partnership, and Barnabas ended up taking Mark on a mission to the island of Cyprus (Acts 15:37–39).

Later, Mark became the companion of Peter and accompanied him to Rome (1 Pet. 5:13). He eventually proved his worth to Paul, and the two were reconciled (2 Tim. 4:11). Tradition records that he also became the first bishop of Alexandria, Egypt.

According to the first-century figure John the Elder, Mark based his Gospel on the preaching of Peter. He stated, “Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ.”⁸

Other early sources indicate Mark wrote his Gospel at the request of Roman Christians who wished to have a written record of Peter’s preaching, and it was because of his association with Peter—the prince of the apostles—that Mark’s Gospel was quickly regarded as sacred and canonical.

Mark’s Gospel is written for an audience of Gentile Christians, as it explains Jewish customs that would be unfamiliar to Gentiles (Mark 7:3–4, 11), and it is a straightforward account of the ministry of Jesus, beginning with his baptism by John the Baptist and continuing through the Resurrection.

Common scholarly opinion holds that Mark was written around A.D. 60–75; however, there is reason to think it was written earlier. It appears that Luke used Mark as one of his sources, so Mark would have been written before A.D. 59 (see answer 7). It also would have been written after he became Peter’s companion (sometime after his mission with Barnabas in A.D. 49). It thus was likely written in the fifties, perhaps around A.D. 55.

A word should be said about the last twelve verses of Mark (16:9–20). Although these verses are in the majority of manuscripts, they do not appear in certain key manuscripts, and most modern scholars believe that they were not written by Mark himself. Instead, it is proposed either that Mark ended his Gospel in a rather abrupt way, that he was prevented from writing an ending, or that the original ending was lost. Someone else then composed the ending of Mark as we have it today.

This would mean someone else may have written the last part of Mark's Gospel, but this is not a problem, as biblical books sometimes have coauthors (note Paul's listing of coauthors in his letters; see answer 3). Whoever wrote these verses, they were penned very early, contain accurate traditions about Jesus, and are considered canonical in the Catholic Church.

7. What is the Gospel of Luke?

Luke is the third Gospel in canonical order, and most scholars today believe that it was written after Mark because at least half of Mark is paralleled in Luke. Luke also acknowledges prior writings about Jesus, stating that “many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1).

Early tradition unanimously attributes this Gospel to Luke, a traveling companion of Paul (2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24) and a physician, who apparently was a Gentile because Paul distinguishes him from his Jewish coworkers (Col. 4:14). According to some early sources, Luke was from Antioch, Syria.⁹

Luke wrote his Gospel for a man he refers to as “most excellent Theophilus” (Luke 1:3), who likely was Luke’s literary patron and paid the costs associated with writing Luke and Acts. The title “most excellent” indicates that he had high social standing, and “Theophilus” may be a codename because it means “lover of God” in Greek.

Most scholars think Luke was written around A.D. 75–90; however, there is reason to think it was written earlier. He likely composed both the Gospel and Acts in Rome, during the two-year house arrest that Paul spent there around A.D. 59–60 (see answer 9). This means it was most likely written in A.D. 59.

Luke indicates that his sources included “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (Luke 1:2). One of these was likely Peter, whom he likely met in Rome and who was clearly one of his sources for Acts.

An additional source would have been Paul—not an eyewitness but a minister of the word—whose traveling companion he long had been. It is notable that Luke’s version of the words of institution for the Eucharist (Luke 22:19–20) is very similar to the formula given by Paul (1 Cor. 11:24–

25), in contrast to the ones given by Matthew and Mark (Matt. 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24).

Another of Luke's sources was either Mary or someone who had interviewed her, for he twice stresses that she "kept all these things" in her heart (Luke 2:19, 51), indicating that she was the source of the information he had just related.

The number of early manuscripts of Luke that survive indicate that it originally was more popular than Mark but not as popular as Matthew. One reason may be that it was more expensive, because it is the longest of the four Gospels (though this is masked by the fact it is divided into fewer chapters than Matthew in modern Bibles).

Luke contains a great deal of unique material. He begins with an extensive treatment of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, as well as an event that happened when Jesus was twelve (Luke 1–2). He also preserves a genealogy of Jesus that traces his descent through David's son Nathan (Luke 3:23–38; note that this is also a genealogy of Joseph, not Mary), indicating that Jesus was descended from David through more than one line.

Luke displays an interest in chronology, and he thus reports that the ministry of John the Baptist began in "the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar" (Luke 3:1)—or A.D. 29—which was quickly followed by the ministry of Jesus, who was "about thirty years of age" (Luke 3:23) at the time.

Many of the things Luke records have heartwarming aspects and stress Jesus' compassion, as when he records the parable of the prodigal son, which is found only in his Gospel (Luke 15:11–32).

8. What is the Gospel of John?

John is the fourth Gospel in canonical order, and most scholars believe it was the last to be written.

It shows evidence of being later than Mark and Luke (the matter is less clear with Matthew). In particular, John appears to have written his Gospel to interlock with the outline of Mark.¹⁰ John also expands on and clarifies things that Luke mentions in passing (cf. Luke 24:12 and 41–43 with John 20:1–10 and 21:1–14). This would place John's writing after A.D. 59 (see answer 7).

John is often dated to the A.D. 90s, but there is reason to think that it was written earlier. It speaks of places in Jerusalem as still existing (John 5:2) that were destroyed during the fall of the city in A.D. 70. It also refers to Peter's martyrdom as a still future event, though this is masked in English translations. In Greek John refers to the death by which Peter "*will* glorify God" (John 21:19). Peter was martyred in A.D. 65 or 66, suggesting that John was written around A.D. 65.

John was written by an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry (see answer 3), and the strong association of the Gospel with the name *John* suggests that it was an eyewitness who was called that. Early tradition strongly supports the idea that it was John son of Zebedee, though it is not clear that this tradition is unanimous. Some recent authors have proposed that a different figure, John the Elder, was involved—either as the person who composed the Gospel based on John son of Zebedee's testimony¹¹ or as the beloved disciple himself.¹²

Whichever John wrote it, this Gospel quickly became the most popular of the four, and more manuscripts survive of it from the early centuries than any of the Synoptics.

John is notably different from the Synoptics and tells the story of Jesus in

a different way. One of the reasons for this is that John is writing to supplement the other Gospels. He expects his readers to already know the synoptic tradition, allowing him to casually say things like “John [the Baptist] had not yet been put in prison” (John 3:24). The arrest of John the Baptist is not mentioned anywhere else in the fourth Gospel, but the author expects the reader to be aware of it from Mark and/or Luke.

John is relatively short, being somewhat longer than Mark. But because he is supplementing the other Gospels, John does not need to repeat all the information they contain, and he focuses on providing material that they omit.

A good bit of this material takes the form of extended speeches that Jesus makes, such as the Bread of Life discourse (John 6) or the Farewell discourses on the night of the Last Supper (John 13–17). Unlike Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount or kingdom parables, these discourses are not composed of short, easily memorizable sayings, which has led some to question their historical accuracy. However, in a world before tape recorders, audiences did not expect verbatim transcripts, particularly of speeches that were given only on one occasion. Instead, they expected a competent author to accurately express the *thought* of the figure in question, even if he put it in his own words, and, as a close companion of Jesus, the beloved disciple knew the thought of Jesus well.

John also displays an interest in chronology, and he provides a number of important details. If all we had were the Synoptics, it would be possible to conclude that the ministry of Jesus lasted only a year, since only one Passover is discussed. However, John indicates that key events in Jesus’ ministry occurred on or near Jewish feasts, including multiple Passovers (John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55; cf. 5:1; 7:2; 10:22), showing that Jesus’ ministry actually lasted several years.

9. What is the book of Acts?

Unlike the Gospels, Acts is not a biography but a history. It covers the period between the resurrection of Jesus and a two-year period of house arrest that Paul experienced in Rome. Scholars debate the dates of these events, proposing estimates that vary by two or three years, but I estimate that the Resurrection occurred in A.D. 33 and Paul's house arrest lasted from A.D. 58–60. Acts thus covers approximately the first twenty-seven years of Church history.

Acts is often dated to A.D. 75–90, but—as with the Gospels—there is reason to think it was written earlier. It is noteworthy that the narrative in Acts cuts off suddenly, with Paul still under house arrest. This strongly suggests that the book was written at the end of this two-year period.

In Acts, Luke has been building up to Paul's trial before Nero for many chapters (since at least 20:22–23), and the reader naturally expects him to relate what happened. Either outcome would suit his literary purpose: if Paul was condemned then Luke could use this as an inspiring example of suffering for the Faith, and if he was released then Luke could show this as a glorious vindication.

Later historical sources suggest that Paul was—indeed—vindicated at his first Roman trial (before Nero became hostile to Christians), but the fact Luke does not tell the reader this and abruptly ends his narrative before its natural climax suggests that the trial had not yet happened.

Therefore, Acts was likely written two years into Paul's detention in Rome, around A.D. 60. Because the end of the Gospel of Luke shows signs of being written to set up the beginning of Acts, it was probably also written during the detention, around A.D. 59.

The author of both books is the same—Luke the physician (see answer 7)—and this one is also addressed to Theophilus (Acts 1:1), who likely

underwrote Luke's writing efforts.

Luke's principal sources for Acts are easy to determine. The first twelve chapters of the book focus almost exclusively on Peter, and Luke likely got the information for this part of the book from him during Paul's house arrest in Rome. The rest of the book focuses on Paul, who was a source for much of that material. In addition, chapter 8 focuses on Philip the evangelist, and he is the likely source of much of this information, as Luke later met him (Acts 21:8). Finally, Luke himself was an eyewitness source for the book, as illustrated by what are known as the *we passages* (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28). In these, Luke uses the first-person plural, saying things like, “we sought to go on to Macedonia” (16:10), indicating that he was present for these events.

The outline of the book of Acts is given when Jesus tells the disciples, “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8), and it then chronicles the expansion of the Gospel, beginning in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), spreading to Samaria (Acts 8), and then through the rest of the Mediterranean world, reaching as far as Rome (Acts 13–28).

A special focus of Acts is how the gospel spread to people from formerly excluded groups, including Samaritans (Acts 8:5–25), eunuchs (Acts 8:26–39), and Gentiles (Acts 10:1–11:18). Particularly noteworthy is the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), which decreed that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised to be Christians.

Acts is an extraordinarily valuable source of information about early Church history, and our knowledge of this period would be incredibly impoverished if we did not have it. Among the many facts it relates is the origin of the name of our faith, stating that it was “in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called *Christians*” (Acts 11:26).

10. How historically accurate are the Gospels and Acts?

Belief in the divine inspiration and thus the complete accuracy of the Gospels and Acts is a matter of faith, but the evidence we have makes this act of faith reasonable.

As historical documents, the Gospels and Acts compare favorably to other, similar works upon which historians depend for knowledge of the ancient world, such as the writings of Greek and Roman historians.

This may be seen by considering the book of Acts, which has the broadest scope, both geographically and with regard to the time period it covers. It therefore offers the most opportunities to be checked against the secular record.

As we have noted (see answer 9), Acts is based on eyewitness testimony, and Luke shows great attention to detail. For example, when chronicling the travels of Paul, he gives specific information about the time it took to arrive at different locations.

This information is accurate, and it could not have simply been looked up in a reference work in the ancient world. This suggests Luke or someone in Paul's circle kept a travel diary. The fact Luke does not give parallel information about travel times in the first part of the book, when Peter dominates the narrative, shows that Luke was faithful to his sources. He used what he had and did not invent such details.

The archaeologist Sir William Ramsay (1851–1939), who was initially a skeptic of Acts, made a detailed review of the evidence and concluded,

Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense; he fixes his mind on the idea and plan that rules in the evolution of history; and proportions the scale of his treatment to the importance of each incident. He seizes the

important and critical events and shows their true nature at greater length, while he touches lightly or omits entirely much that was valueless for his purpose. In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.¹³

Luke was also the author of one of the Gospels, and he would have shown the same care in handling the testimony he received from the “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (Luke 1:2) upon which he based the work. The substance of the information contained in Luke is also found in the other three Gospels, indicating their fundamental accuracy.

However, we can go beyond the overall substance of the gospel story, for details in the Gospels indicate that their authors were accurately preserving information about the life of Jesus.

For example, in John, when Jesus is about to miraculously feed the five thousand, he asks Philip where it would be possible to buy bread (John 6:5–6). This is surprising because Philip was not a major apostle. However, John also records that Philip was from Bethsaida—the town from which Peter and Andrew originally hailed (John 1:44; 12:21).

Luke records that the feeding of the five thousand occurred in a desolate place near the town of Bethsaida (Luke 9:10–13). That would explain why Jesus might ask Philip where bread could be bought, but because Peter and Andrew also came from Bethsaida, and because they were two of the most prominent apostles, we would expect him to ask them.

The matter is clarified in Mark, which indicates Peter and Andrew were now living in the village of Capernaum (Mark 1:21–29). They no longer lived in Bethsaida and would not have up-to-date knowledge of where bread could be bought. Jesus thus asked Philip.

It is striking that each fact is mentioned in only one of the Gospels:

- Only John mentions that Jesus asked Philip where to buy bread and that Philip was from Bethsaida.

- Only Luke mentions that the feeding of the five thousand took place near Bethsaida.
- Only Mark mentions that Peter and Andrew were now living in Capernaum.

Yet when careful attention is paid to the details of each Gospel, a coherent picture emerges of why Jesus asked a lesser apostle like Philip where bread could be bought.

This is not the kind of situation that would arise if the evangelists were making up details at random. The Gospels are all too short for chance to explain the matter. Neither does the situation reflect a collusion of authors, for the relevant details are mentioned only in passing and nothing is ever made of them.

This indicates that the evangelists are accurately recording historical details, whose integrity is shown when their accounts are compared.

11. Who was St. Paul?

The apostle Paul is a major author of the New Testament documents, having composed most of the letters that it contains.

He was born in the city of Tarsus, in modern-day Turkey, but he was raised in Jerusalem, where he received a religious education in the tradition of the Pharisees from the scholar Gamaliel the Elder (Acts 22:3).

His father was a member of the tribe of Benjamin (Phil. 3:5) and a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28). This explains why Paul is known by two names. His Jewish name was Saul, a name that may have been popular among Benjaminites because of Israel's King Saul, who had come from that tribe. However, his Roman name was Paulus. It is likely that Paul's father or grandfather became a Roman citizen in Tarsus in the first century B.C.

We know little of the rest of Paul's family, though we do know that he had a sister and a nephew living in Jerusalem (Acts 23:16).

By profession, Paul was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3), and he used this trade to support his apostolic work so that he did not need to be a financial burden to the churches he founded (1 Cor. 9:1, 4, 6; Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8).

Paul was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, and initially he was quite hostile to the early Christian movement. As a young man, he was present at and consented to the martyrdom of St. Stephen around A.D. 36 (Acts 7:58; 8:1). He then took a leading role in persecuting the Church in Jerusalem "and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:2).

He then secured letters from the high priest to the synagogues of Damascus, Syria, allowing him to arrest Christians there and bring them to Jerusalem (Acts 9:1–2). However, on the road to Damascus, Jesus appeared to him, and he was converted (Acts 9:3–6). As a result of this experience, Paul was blind for three days, providing a physical demonstration of the

power of Jesus (Acts 9:8–9, 17–19).

Jesus also sent (Greek, *apostellô*) Paul to the Jewish people and the Gentiles to preach the message of salvation to them (Acts 26:17–18). Paul's experience of the risen Jesus is thus why he was an apostle even though he was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry: he had been commissioned directly by Christ (Gal. 1:1; cf. 1 Cor. 9:1).

Initially, Paul preached the message of Jesus in Damascus and Jerusalem (Acts 9:19–22, 26–28) before Barnabas brought him to Antioch, Syria, which became his home base for evangelization (Acts 11:25).

As the companion of Barnabas, Paul embarked on what is known as the *First Missionary Journey* (Acts 13–14)—a major evangelistic mission to the island of Cyprus and the mainland of modern Turkey that took place around A.D. 43–49. He was then present at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

After dissolving his partnership with Barnabas over a dispute about Mark (see answer 6), Paul embarked on the *Second Missionary Journey* (Acts 15:40–18:22), in which he traveled through modern Turkey, Macedonia, and Greece around A.D. 49–51.

After a brief return to Antioch, he then conducted the *Third Missionary Journey* (Acts 18:23–21:17) around A.D. 51–55. He returned from this trip bearing a gift for the poor of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 24:17). He did so having been warned ahead of time that he faced persecution and arrest there (Acts 21:10–14), and he was indeed arrested (Acts 21:27–36).

He then spent two years in detention by the Roman governor Felix, before the new governor—Porcius Festus—arrived around A.D. 57 (Acts 24:27). Paul then used his Roman citizenship to have his case transferred to Rome so that it could be personally judged by Nero (Acts 25:7–12).

Paul was then sent to Rome, where he spent two years under house arrest, awaiting trial (Acts 28:30). It is at this point, around A.D. 60, that the narrative of Acts ends, without revealing the outcome of the trial (see

answer 9). However, we have evidence from later sources that indicates Paul was released and was able to fulfill his desire to go as far as Spain to preach the gospel (Rom. 15:24, 28; cf. 1 Clement 5:7a).

The great fire of Rome in A.D. 64 caused Nero's attitude toward Christians to turn hostile, and he used them as public scapegoats for the fire.¹⁴ Consequently, when Paul was arrested again, he was put to death at Rome under Nero's officials.¹⁵ This occurred around A.D. 67.

Although Paul did make Jewish converts, his preaching bore special fruit among the Gentiles (Gal. 2:8; Eph. 3:8), and today he is known as *the apostle to the Gentiles*.

12. What are the Pauline epistles?

During the course of his ministry Paul wrote numerous letters. Some of these are lost (see 1 Cor. 5:9; 2 Cor. 2:3–9; 7:8–12; Col. 4:16), but letters that he wrote to seven churches have been preserved in the New Testament.

1) *Romans* was written in late A.D. 54 or early 55, while Paul was staying at Corinth at the end of the Third Missionary Journey, as he was preparing to return with a gift for the church in Jerusalem. At this point, Paul had never visited Rome, but he hoped to travel there on his way to Spain (Rom. 15:24, 26).

Despite his lack of personal connection with the Roman Christians, he wrote to them in hopes of preparing a favorable reception for himself. He also sought to combat the idea that one must be circumcised and become a Jew in order to be saved—an idea that was still present in many circles, despite it having been rejected by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

He therefore devotes a great deal of *Romans* to the subject of how both Jews and Gentiles are justified through their faith in Christ and not by works of the Mosaic Law (Rom. 3:28–30). He also provides an extended discussion of divine Providence and the role of Israel and the Gentiles in God's plan (Rom. ch. 9–11).

2) *First Corinthians* was written while Paul was in Ephesus during the Third Missionary Journey, around A.D. 53. He wrote it after receiving a report from Corinth that the church there was being plagued by factions, as individual Corinthians were dividing themselves up based on which religious leaders they admired. The first part of the letter is thus devoted to combating factionalism.

Paul also responded to several questions that the Corinthians had sent him in a letter, dealing with topics such as marriage and sexual relations, eating food that had been offered to idols, spiritual gifts such as speaking in

tongues, and the collection he was taking up for the poor in Jerusalem. He also combated the idea, which some Corinthians were entertaining, that the dead would not be raised at the end of time.

3) *Second Corinthians* was written while Paul was in Macedonia, toward the end of the Third Missionary Journey, placing it in late A.D. 54 or early 55. He wrote it in response to problems that had developed between him and some at Corinth. Not everyone there was devoted to Paul (1 Cor. 1:12), and after he sent the previous letter, matters with his opponents reached a crisis point.

He therefore wrote them a letter “out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears” (2 Cor. 2:4) that he “might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything” (2 Cor. 2:9). He was therefore relieved when his coworker Titus arrived with news that the Corinthians had reaffirmed their love for him (2 Cor. 7:6–7).

Despite this, word apparently reached Paul while he was preparing 2 Corinthians that some still scorned him, and he undertook a heated and extended defense of his apostolic ministry (2 Cor. 10:1–13:11).

4) *Galatians* was written shortly after the Jerusalem Council, which it discusses (Gal. 2:1–10). It likely was composed around A.D. 50, though a date around 53 also is possible.

The reason Paul wrote is that the idea one must be circumcised as a Jew to be saved had begun to take root in churches that he had founded in the province of Galatia (Acts 16:6). Paul insists that this idea is contrary to the true gospel, and he mounts a vigorous defense of it, telling the Galatians, “even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8).

5) *Ephesians* is something of a puzzle. Although some manuscripts list the letter as being addressed “to the saints who are at Ephesus” (Eph. 1:1), others lack the words “at Ephesus.”

The contents of the letter do not reflect the intimate familiarity Paul had

with the Ephesian Christians, whose church he founded and among whom he had spent three years (Acts 18:19–21; 20:31). Consequently, many have proposed that this letter was originally a circular letter intended to be read in many churches, not all of which Paul had visited. One copy may have been sent to Ephesus, but it was written without presupposing that the readers knew him.

It is clear that Paul was in prison at the time he wrote (Eph. 3:1). It is thus known as one of his *prison letters*, and various factors point to it being composed during Paul's first Roman imprisonment, around A.D. 59 or 60. As a circular letter, Ephesians reflects on general spiritual themes, including the salvation of Jews and Gentiles in Christ (Eph. 2:4–22).

6) *Philippians* is another prison letter (Phil. 1:17), and it also was likely written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (cf. Phil. 1:13). Paul had founded the church at Philippi (Acts 16:12–40), and they had helped him financially in his ministry to other churches (Phil. 4:15–16). He is grateful for additional support they have sent him during his imprisonment (Phil. 4:18).

The letter is famous for preserving a first-century hymn to Christ (Phil. 2:6–11), and as in other letters, Paul warns against the idea that one needs to be circumcised to be saved (Phil. 3:2–9).

7) *Colossians* was written at the same time as Ephesians, and was delivered by the same courier, a man named Tychicus (Eph. 6:21–22; Col. 4:7–8). It was sent to the church at Colossae, which Paul had not visited (Col. 2:1), and it shares many of the same themes as Ephesians. One of them is a warning against the idea they need to embrace Jewish practices such as circumcision, eating a kosher diet, or observing Jewish feast days (Col. 2:11–23).

8) *First Thessalonians* may be the first of Paul's surviving letters. It was written around A.D. 50, just a few months after he had founded the church of Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–10). He had been forced to flee this city after

only three weeks because of anti-Christian violence, and he was naturally concerned about whether his new converts would remain faithful. He therefore sent Timothy to visit the church and was overjoyed when his protégé returned with the news that the Thessalonians remained faithful (1 Thess. 3:6–10).

In addition to his standard exhortations to living a moral life in Christ, including an exhortation not to be idle (1 Thess. 5:13), Paul also gives the Thessalonians supplemental instruction on the fate of the dead and the end of the world (1 Thess. 4:13–5:11).

9) *Second Thessalonians* was written shortly after its predecessor, likely later in A.D. 50. The reason was to encourage the new converts in their faith and to correct two problems.

One was confusion about the end of the world. Apparently, some thought Paul had indicated that the return of Christ was so close that it had already begun or already happened. He thus tells them that the end will not come before certain signs are fulfilled (2 Thess. 2:1–15).

The other problem he addresses is that the idle among the Thessalonians had not taken the hint from his first letter and were still mooching off others rather than getting jobs. He therefore instructs their fellow Christians to keep away from them until they repent (2 Thess. 3:6–15).

13. What are the Pastoral Epistles?

In addition to the letters Paul wrote to churches, the New Testament also reserves four to individuals. Three of these are known as the *Pastoral Epistles* because they are written to Paul's protégés Timothy and Titus, and he gives them instructions on how to conduct their ministry as pastors.

The final letter is written to an individual named Philemon, who may well have been a pastor because a church met in his house (Philem. ch. 1–2), however Paul gives him no instructions concerning pastoral ministry. It is thus not classed as a pastoral epistle.

1) *First Timothy* appears to have been written around A.D. 65, after Paul's first Roman imprisonment had ended. Paul had urged Timothy to remain in Ephesus and instruct certain people not to teach false doctrines (1 Tim. 1:3–8). He also gives him instructions concerning appointing bishops and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1–13) and the proper behavior of various groups in the Church, including consecrated widows (1 Tim. 5:3–16).

2) *Second Timothy* likely was written in A.D. 66, the year before Paul's martyrdom. He had already been arrested (2 Tim. 1:8) and taken to Rome (2 Tim. 1:17), and he senses that the date of his death is approaching, writing, "I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the Faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day" (2 Tim. 4:6–8).

Paul is almost alone in his imprisonment, with only Luke available to him (2 Tim. 4:10–12). He urges Timothy to come before the travel season closes in winter (2 Tim. 4:21) and to bring certain personal possessions so that he may make use of them in the time he has left (2 Tim. 4:13).

3) *Titus* appears to have been written about the same time as 1 Timothy, around A.D. 65. The letter reveals that Paul has left his coworker Titus on

the island of Crete, telling him to “amend what was defective, and to appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). He thus reviews the qualifications for the office of elder, which at this time overlapped with the office of bishop (Titus 1:6–9).

Paul tells Titus to offer instruction on Christian living to members of the churches of Crete (Titus 2:1–15), including the proper attitude toward secular rulers and other non-Christians (Titus 3:1–2).

4) *Philemon* is unique among Paul’s letters in several respects. It is much shorter than any of the others, which actually makes it a normal size for an ancient letter. It also deals with a very private matter. This letter sent at the same time as Colossians (Col. 4:7–9 with Philem. 10) to a man named Philemon who hosted a church in his house in Colossae. It is thus a private letter accompanying the public letter to the Colossians.

Paul writes that he was found during his imprisonment by Onesimus, a runaway slave of Philemon’s, whom Paul has now converted to the Faith. The letter is meant to encourage the master and slave to reconcile as brothers in Christ, and Paul appeals to Philemon to send Onesimus back to him. Many scholars have understood Paul to be appealing for Philemon to emancipate Onesimus. One way or another, the book testifies to God’s compassion for those experiencing slavery.

14. What is the book of Hebrews?

In canonical order, Hebrews is placed after the Pastoral Epistles and before the Catholic Epistles. It does not begin as a letter, as it does not open with a reference to a sender, recipients, or a greeting. Instead, it immediately begins discussing its subject matter.

However, it does have letter-like characteristics. It has a postscript of the sort we would expect in a letter, and the author asks the readers to heed the “word of exhortation” that “I have written to you” (Heb. 13:22). He relates news concerning Timothy, says he hopes to visit the recipients, and conveys greetings (Heb. 13:23–25). Hebrews thus may be considered a letter, though some have proposed alternatives, such as it being a homily or theological treatise that was then used as a letter after the postscript was supplied.

Through much of Church history, Paul was regarded as the author of Hebrews, though there was doubt about this early on. For example, Jerome notes that Pope St. Zephyrinus (A.D. 119–217) denied that it was by Paul.¹⁶ Tertullian held that it was written by Barnabas,¹⁷ and Origen preserved reports that it was written by Luke or Pope St. Clement I, though he concludes, “But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows.”¹⁸

The author was Jewish and writing to a predominately Jewish audience, writing that “God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets” (Heb. 1:1). He has a position of teaching authority (note the way he addresses the audience in Hebrews 5:11–14), and he was a second-generation Christian, not an eyewitness of Jesus, for he spoke of how salvation “was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him” (Heb. 2:3). Modern scholars generally think it unlikely Paul would have written in this way, as he stresses that he received the gospel by revelation, as a result of his encounter with Jesus (Gal. 1:11–12).

The letter was written either to or from Italy, as it contains greetings from Italian Christians (Heb. 13:24), and it speaks as if the Jewish priests in

Jerusalem are still offering sacrifice in the temple (Heb. 8:4), which would put the composition before A.D. 70. It may have been written after the Jewish War began in A.D. 66 because it refers to the Old Covenant as being “ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:13), in fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy of the temple’s destruction (Mark 13:1–2). It likely was written around A.D. 68.

The chief subject of Hebrews is Jesus Christ, and the letter opens with an extensive discussion of how—as God’s Son—Jesus is superior to all angels (Heb. 1:4–14), to Moses (Heb. 3:1–6), and to the Jewish high priests (Heb. 4:14–5:10). There are also multiple exhortations to the readers to persevere and not to fall away (Heb. 2:1; 3:6–4:13; etc.), which in context would mean abandoning the Christian faith and resuming the practice of non-Christian Judaism. This is also a sign that the book was written before A.D. 70, because if the temple had been destroyed, it would have been mentioned as clinching proof of the author’s entire line of argument.

15. What are the Catholic Epistles?

The final collection of letters in the New Testament is a set of seven that are called *catholic* (Greek, *katholikê*: “general,” “universal”) because most of them are written to broad audiences (though 2 John was written to a church and 3 John to an individual).

1) *James* is attributed to “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). Tradition indicates this was James the Just, who was also Jesus’ “brother” (Gal. 1:19). He likely did not mention his relationship to Jesus because Jesus stressed the importance of having a spiritual relationship rather than a familial one (Mark 3:31–35).

The letter is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1), indicating a wide audience of Jewish Christians in the many nations to which they had been scattered (cf. Acts 26:7).

James the Just was martyred in A.D. 62,¹⁹ indicating that the letter was written before this year. The content of the letter suggests that it was written quite early, though likely after early reports of Paul’s First Missionary Journey to the Gentiles had begun to be received at Jerusalem (c. A.D. 48), as indicated by its discussion of justification by faith in relationship to works (James 2:14–26). This points to a composition around A.D. 48, though a later date is not impossible.

The letter focuses primarily on ethical teaching, and it echoes many points discussed in the Gospels, particularly in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7).

2) *First Peter* is addressed to “the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Pet. 1:1)—all parts of modern Turkey. The reference to “the exiles of the Dispersion” could be taken as a reference to Jewish Christians, but there are indications that Peter actually has Gentiles in mind (1 Pet. 1:18; 2:10; 3:6; 4:3–4). It was likely written not

long before 2 Peter, perhaps around A.D. 62–63.

The letter was written from Rome (“Babylon”; 1 Pet. 5:13), and its purpose was to exhort Christians to live lives of faith and obedience, particularly in light of the hostility they faced from others.

3) *Second Peter* does not identify where its audience lived, but it refers to itself as “the second letter I have written you,” indicating the same audience as 1 Peter. It is also therefore later than 1 Peter, and since Peter says that he knows his death will be soon (2 Pet. 1:12–15), it was likely written around A.D. 64–65, shortly before his martyrdom in A.D. 65 or 66.

The purpose of the letter was to exhort Christians to remain faithful, to lead moral lives, to await the coming of the Lord, and to avoid false teachers, including those who were perverting the writings of St. Paul (2 Pet. 3:15–17).

4) *First John* is similar to Hebrews in that it lacks standard features of a letter (sender, recipients, greeting), making it read more like a homily. The lack of letter-like features may mean it was meant for several congregations rather than a specific one.

It shows notable similarities to the Gospel of John. Not only is the style similar, but it shares many of the same themes (being born of God, the new commandment of love, light and darkness, etc.), and the opening of the letter (1 John 1:1–7) is strongly reminiscent of the opening of the Gospel (John 1:1–9). External tradition consequently attributes it to the same author as the Gospel (i.e., John).

The letter does not contain many concrete clues about when it was written, and scholars generally date it to the same period as the other literature attributed to John. On our reckoning, that would be the mid-A.D. 60s.

The purpose of the letter is pastoral, and John exhorts his readers to live as Christians should and to avoid certain false teachers who have withdrawn from the community (1 John 2:18–23).

5) *Second John* is only a single chapter long, making it one of the few

New Testament epistles that was of normal length for an ancient letter (the others are Philemon, 3 John, and Jude). It is written by “the elder,” whom external tradition identifies as John, though there is a question of whether it is John son of Zebedee or John the Elder (see answer 3).

He is writing to “the elect lady and her children.” In keeping with the early practice of personifying churches as women (see 1 Pet. 5:13), scholars have understood this to be a reference to a local church and its members.

Like 1 John, 2 John does not contain concrete indications of when it was written, and scholars generally date it to the same period as the other works they attributed to John, which is either the A.D. 90s or, in the view we have advocated, the A.D. 60s.

The elder encourages the readers to love one another and to be on guard against “men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the Antichrist” (v. 7).

6) *Third John* is the shortest book of the New Testament, being just 218 words in Greek. It is from the elder to a man named Gaius. The elder commends him for his service to fellow Christians, including traveling missionaries (vv. 5–8). He also warns Gaius against a community leader named Diotrephes, who was critical of the elder and refused to welcome others from the elder’s circle (vv. 9–10).

This letter may be a companion to 2 John, since the elder says he has “written something to the church” (v. 9). If so, it would be dated to the same period.

7) *Jude* is only a single chapter long. Its sender is “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.” The use of the name James, without qualification, points to the most famous James at the time—i.e., James the Just. This makes the author one of the “brethren of the Lord” (cf. Mark 6:3).

It likely was written after James’s death in A.D. 62, when Jude would have assumed a more prominent role and could have written a letter with as broad an audience as this one: “those who are called, beloved in God the

Father and kept for Jesus Christ” (v. 1). It also was written when those who heard the apostles were still alive (v. 17).

Jude and 2 Peter have a great deal of overlap (see especially Jude 1:6–13 with 2 Peter 2:4–17). The parallels are so close that one must be borrowing from the other, or there must be a common source behind the two. Without a sure way of resolving this matter, we date Jude to approximately the same time as 2 Peter—i.e., around A.D. 64–65—though it could have been earlier or later.

The letter was written for a very specific purpose: to warn against false teachers and their immoral lifestyle, and Jude uses many colorful illustrations in his critique of them.

16. What is the book of Revelation?

Revelation is a book of prophecy. Its purpose is “to show to [Christ’s] servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John” (Rev. 1:1). It is intended to encourage them to hold fast to their Christian faith in the face of persecution and the traumatic events that were soon to come.

Most have understood the John in question to be John son of Zebedee, though some in the early Church, and some recent scholars, have understood it to be John the Elder (see answer 3).

Revelation is addressed to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (Rev. 1:4)—that is, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Rev. 1:11). There were actually more churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor at the time (e.g., the church of the Colossians), and these seven are likely selected because John was personally familiar with them and the number seven is a biblical symbol for completeness.

The book was written while John was in exile on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9), and although many have dated the book to the A.D. 90s, there is evidence it was written earlier. It speaks as if the Jerusalem temple is still operating (Rev. 11:1–2), and the most precise clue as to its dating may be its interpretation of the seven heads of the beast John sees: “The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while” (Rev. 17:9–10).

The seven mountains have been identified since ancient times as the seven hills of Rome, since the seven kings involve a reference to the Roman emperors. Note that—like the Roman emperors—the beast blasphemes God, persecutes the saints, rules the world, and receives worship from all but Christians (Rev. 13:6–8). It also has the number 666 (Rev. 13:18), which is what “Nero Caesar” (NRWN QSR) adds up to in Hebrew and

Aramaic (N+R+W+N+Q+S+R = 50+200+6+50+100+60+200 = 666).

If the seven heads are the line of first-century Roman emperors, then the five who “have fallen” would be Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. The one who “is” would be Nero’s successor, Galba, and the other who “has not yet come” would be Otho, who did—indeed—reign “only a little while” (three months). This would place the composition of Revelation during the reign of Galba (A.D. June 9, 68–January 15, 69).

Revelation draws heavily from Old Testament imagery, and it is not possible to correctly interpret the book without a thorough understanding of the symbols on which it draws. This has contributed to the widely divergent interpretations of the book. Among these, the following are prominent:

- *Preterism* holds that the bulk of the book deals with events toward the beginning of Christian history—either the first century or the first few centuries.
- *Historicism* holds that the bulk of the book forms an outline of Church history, so that as you proceed through the book you move through the different centuries until you arrive at the end of time.
- *Idealism* holds that the bulk of the book describes the conflict between good and evil that plays out in Church history, but it does not relate it in the form of a simple timeline (as in historicism). Instead, it presents elements that occur over and over again during Church history in a cyclical pattern.
- *Futurism* holds that the bulk of the book deals with material that lies in our future.

Which of these views is to be preferred? The natural starting point is preterism. The biblical prophets focus primarily on events occurring in their own generation or within a few generations—not thousands of years later. Also, the major symbols in Revelation fit a first-century context very well

(e.g., the heads of the beast as the Roman emperors). And both the beginning and the end of the book say that the events it describes are “what must soon take place” (Rev. 1:1; 22:6). Combined, these facts create a strong initial case for the view that most of Revelation deals with the beginning of Church history.

This is not to say that it does not also have aspects that apply to the future. It clearly does (e.g., Rev. 20:7–22:5). Similarly, it contains lessons that apply to all ages of Christian history. It is thus a complex book whose interpretation must be handled carefully. For more on the interpretation of Revelation, see *20 Answers: Bible Prophecy*.

17. How did the New Testament canon develop?

The books of the Old Testament were written during a period of around a thousand years. By contrast, the books of the New Testament were written in less than a century. This did not mean that they were all instantly recognized as canonical. It took some time for the Holy Spirit to guide the Church into a definitive recognition of what belonged in the canon.

The process of canonization began as the authors of the New Testament began composing their books and handing them on to the Christian community as reliable and authoritative guides to the Faith.

For many years, it was the fashion among scholars to envision each author producing only a single copy of each work and sharing it with only a single community, for whom he had tailored it specifically. This applied not only to letters to churches but also to works like the Gospels, which were assumed to be written for single churches.

The idea was that, over time, the churches in different communities began making additional copies of the New Testament documents, sharing them with each other; and gradually the whole body of New Testament documents was gathered together, somewhat like a snowball increasing in size.

Such “snowball” theories have come under increasing criticism in recent years, with some scholars arguing that the New Testament documents were aimed at much broader audiences. In particular, it is argued that the Gospels were not written for individual churches but were meant to be shared broadly among Christians.²⁰ Even Luke, which is addressed to Theophilus, was unlikely to be meant solely for him to read. Instead, Theophilus was likely the patron who paid for multiple copies of Luke to be distributed in the churches. The same is true of Acts.

What about Paul’s letters? We have other examples of published

collections of letters from the ancient world (Cicero's being a famous one), and recent studies of these have not supported the idea that such collections grew haphazardly as people gradually collected single copies that had been sent out.

Instead, the first edition of an author's letters was usually produced by the author himself from copies he had retained in his archive. He determined which letters would be published and the principle that they would be organized by (e.g., by date, topic, or length). After his death, his literary executors might produce expanded editions, which followed the same organizing principle the author had established.²¹

We have evidence that this happened in the case of Paul's letters. They are organized by length, beginning with the largest—Romans—and then growing smaller as we proceed toward 2 Thessalonians. However, there is a hiccup in this pattern: Ephesians is somewhat longer than Galatians, and it may represent the beginning of an expanded edition. The first edition of Paul's letters then would have been Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, and Galatians.

When was it produced? Pope St. Clement I speaks of 1 Corinthians as if it was the “first” letter Paul wrote to that church,²² but we know there was a previous, lost letter (1 Cor. 5:9). This suggests that Clement was familiar with the original edition of Paul's letters, in which 1 Corinthians was the first letter to that church.

The significance of this is often missed, because *1 Clement* has often been erroneously dated to the A.D. 90s. However, various lines of evidence indicate that it was actually written around the first half of the year A.D. 70. We can be that precise about it because it refers to the Jerusalem temple, which was destroyed in August of A.D. 70, as still functioning,²³ and it refers to “the sudden and repeated misfortunes and calamities that have happened to us [in Rome]”²⁴—a likely reference to the disastrous “year of four emperors” in A.D. 69, which ended with order being restored under the

new emperor Vespasian. It thus appears that *1 Clement* was written between the election of Vespasian by the Senate in December of A.D. 69 and the destruction of the temple in August of 70.

This is so close to Paul's martyrdom around A.D. 67 that it suggests that the first edition of Paul's letters was prepared by the apostle himself—just like other famous writers of the period. After his death, his disciples produced an expanded collection that included the letters from Ephesians to 2 Thessalonians, and either at the same time or shortly afterward a further collection of his letters to individuals (1–2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon) was issued.

We thus see evidence of portions of the New Testament coming together in authoritative collections even in the first century.

A guiding principle in the collection of the New Testament letters may have been the number seven, which represented completeness. We've already noted (see answer 16) that Revelation was written to seven churches. It was pointed out early on that Paul's letter collection is addressed to churches in seven locations (Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica), and if Hebrews is grouped with the Pauline letters, there are fourteen in total. Similarly, there are seven catholic epistles. The desire to produce collections based on the number seven could explain why the very short letters (Philemon, 2–3 John, Jude) were included.

While we have evidence that the core of the New Testament came together quickly, not every question was settled at once, and it had fuzzy boundaries for some time. Thus, some early writers expressed doubt about the canonicity of some works, such as Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, and Revelation.

On the other hand, some early writers considered books to be scriptural that were not ultimately included in the New Testament. Clement of Rome was an associate of the apostles, and some in the early Church considered *1*

Clement to be canonical. Others regarded the work of first-century prophecy known as the *Shepherd of Hermas* to be Scripture. Another early work that some considered canonical was the letter of pseudo-Barnabas.

The second century saw a proliferation of allegedly scriptural works, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the mutilated edition of the New Testament produced by the heretic Marcion, and the apocryphal gospels written to support the emerging Gnostic movement. However, these were quickly dismissed as they had not been handed down from the time of the apostles, and they disagreed with apostolic teaching (see St. Irenaeus of Lyons's *Against Heresies*).

The New Testament continued to have a solid core but fuzzy boundaries into the early 300s. Eusebius of Caesarea summarized the state of opinion in his day.²⁵ He divided the books into several categories:

Undisputed books:

- The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
- Acts of the Apostles
- The letters of Paul
- 1 John
- 1 Peter

Disputed books:

- Letter to the Hebrews
- James
- 2 Peter
- 2–3 John
- Jude
- Revelation of John
- Shepherd of Hermas
- Gospel of the Hebrews

Rejected books:

- Revelation of Peter
- Pseudo-Barnabas
- The Didache
- Gospels of Peter, Thomas, and Matthias
- Acts of Paul, Andrew, and John

The situation was soon clarified, and a series of local councils in North Africa in the late 300s and early 400s endorsed the New Testament as we have it today. Later, the ecumenical Council of Florence (1438–1445) authoritatively taught on which books should be included in the Bible, and the Council of Trent (1545–1563) reaffirmed its teaching infallibly.

The reason Trent needed to rule infallibly was that the Protestant Reformers, beginning with Martin Luther, had objected to certain Catholic teachings that were supported in the deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament and in certain New Testament books. In particular, Luther rejected or questioned the canonicity of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation.

Fortunately, later Protestants have recognized the canonicity of these works, and today there is virtual agreement among Christians on the content of the New Testament canon.

18. How does the New Testament relate to the Old?

The Old Testament provides the essential background needed to understand the New Testament. It is a tragedy that more Christians are not familiar with the books of the Old Testament. For the first Christians—including the authors of the New Testament—these books *were* the scriptures. They shaped their thought and life and informed their faith in a way that many modern Christians are almost completely unaware of, and not knowing the Old Testament is a frequent cause of misunderstanding things in the New Testament.

An obvious way that the Old Testament relates to the New is that it provides the historical background of Israel as God's chosen people. It contains the record of God's dealings with Israel and introduces numerous concepts that are referred to in the New Testament. Without its books, one would have no understanding of the significance of Jesus as the "Son of David."

Another way that the Old Testament relates to the New is by providing moral context. The moral principles found in the Pentateuch—and elsewhere in the Old Testament—are expressions of God's will that hold true in the New Testament age and that inform the basic Christian moral vision. These include its emphasis on the worship of the one, true God and of the moral duties we have to other human beings. The fundamental Christian ethic of love is rooted directly in the Old Testament, for in Matthew 22:37–39, Jesus tells us that the two great commandments are "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5) and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (a quotation from Leviticus 19:18).

Finally, the Old Testament relates to the New by providing its prophetic

context. This happens in ways that are both obvious and subtle. For example, it is obvious that the Old Testament contains prophecies that relate directly to the Christian age. Thus the book of Jeremiah contains the promise that God will establish a “new covenant” with his people, one which will be spiritually transformative, unlike the one made through Moses (Jer. 31:31–34); and on the night of his passion, Jesus declared this prophecy fulfilled, stating, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20).

The Old Testament’s messianic prophecies—whether obvious or subtle—are why Jesus, when walking with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, was able “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” to explain “to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

19. How should we interpret the New Testament?

The writings of the New Testament have a great deal to say to us. They are the primary documents of the Christian faith, and they contain our primary sources of information about Jesus' life and teachings.

Yet applying the New Testament today must be done with care. The Church recognizes that Scripture operates on more than one level, the most fundamental giving us its "literal" sense. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, "The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: all other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal" (CCC 116).

The first step in applying a text from the New Testament is thus identifying its literal sense: What was the original human author seeking to communicate to his audience? How would they have understood it?

Identifying the literal sense does not mean taking it in a woodenly literal way, but recognizing the various symbols and forms of literary expression that the ancient authors used when communicating their message. Recognizing this is particularly important when reading material such as parables and prophecies.

Only after the literal sense has been correctly identified are we ready to proceed to additional meanings, which are found in the "spiritual" sense of the text. This is traditionally divided into several subsenses:

- The *allegorical* sense. We can acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ; thus the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or type of Christ's victory and also of Christian baptism.
- The *moral* sense. The events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly. As Paul says, they were written "for our instruction."

- The *anagogical* sense (Greek, *anagôgê*: “leading”). We can view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true homeland: thus the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem (CCC 117).

These senses become especially important in passages where the New Testament authors are quoting and applying texts from the Old Testament. Thus Paul sees Abraham’s wives, Sarah and Hagar (Gen. 16), as “an allegory” of “two covenants”—the Old and the New (Gal. 4:24). Similarly, he sees the rock which miraculously gave the Israelites water (Num. 20) as an allegory of Christ (1 Cor. 10:4).

Paul draws out the moral sense of various Old Testament texts where the Israelites indulged in immorality (Exod. 32:1–6; Num. 14:2; 21:6; 25:1–9) and concludes, “Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11).

Finally, the author of Hebrews explores the anagogical sense of Old Testament texts in which the Israelites who disobeyed God failed to enter his rest in the promised land (e.g., Ps. 95:11)—and how the Sabbath rest itself points forward to the eternal rest that awaits those who believe the gospel, concluding, “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience” (Heb. 4:11).

Still, the literal sense remains primary, and we must seek to determine it for any biblical text—Old Testament or New—before proceeding to look at additional possible meanings.

20. How can we study the New Testament?

We are fortunate to live in an age in which studying the New Testament is easier than ever. Not only are Bibles common and inexpensive, but almost all of us have been blessed with an education that provided the gift of literacy.

Compared to prior ages in history, we are extraordinarily fortunate, and we can show our gratitude for the blessings we have been given by taking advantage of them and sitting down and actually reading the New Testament—as well as the Old.

In doing so, we face the choice of which Bible to read, and here again we are blessed with an abundance of options. If we prefer the elevated “King James” language of older translations, versions such as the Catholic Douay-Rheims are available to us. So are modern translations in easy-to-read, colloquial English.

Bibles today come with introductions and notes, and some “study Bibles” contain extensive study materials. Some editions are even devoted to particular themes, such as devotion, life application, and apologetics. There are also “youth Bibles” designed to meet the needs and answer the questions of young people, as well as “365-day Bibles” designed to help you read through the entire Bible in a year.

We also are not confined to reading a single Bible, and it can be helpful to compare and contrast different translations, including non-Catholic ones, though we must be careful with the introductions and notes these contain.

Bible reading is the foundation of Bible study, and it is essential that we engage in it if we are to study the New Testament. We need to read and think reflectively about what we have read if we are to absorb the message of God’s word.

We need not be intimidated by this project, because although the Bible

itself is large, we can take on the task of reading and digesting individual portions of it. Pope Benedict XVI even recommended that we do so while on summer vacation:

I would therefore like to make a suggestion: why not discover some of the books of the Bible which are not commonly well known? Or those from which we heard certain passages in the liturgy but which we never read in their entirety? Indeed, many Christians never read the Bible and have a very limited and superficial knowledge of it. The Bible, as the name says, is a collection of books, a small “library” that came into being in the course of a millennium.

Some of these “small books” of which it is composed are almost unknown to the majority, even people who are good Christians.

After suggesting some Old Testament books to read, he went on to say,

And what about the New? The New Testament is of course better known, and its literary genres are less diversified. Yet the beauty of reading a Gospel at one sitting must be discovered, just as I also recommend the Acts of the Apostles, or one of the letters.²⁶

Beyond simply reading the New Testament, we can go deeper by participating in the many Bible studies that have been authored in our day—whether they are devoted to particular books of the New Testament or particular themes that it contains. We can do this privately, in parish groups, or online.

In addition to Bible studies, there are also extensive commentaries on all of the books of the New Testament, which can shed even greater light on its pages. Some of these are written on the popular level and accessible to all, while others go into scholarly detail for those wishing to dive deep into the mysteries of the New Testament.

It is even possible—and easier than one might think—to begin studying the language in which the New Testament is written: Greek. Classes are

taught around the country, and there also are many textbooks and language study programs that can be used on an individual basis—allowing people to encounter God’s word in the languages in which it was composed, providing even greater insight.

Finally, we are blessed to have many additional resources that shed light on the New Testament, including maps and atlases, books on New Testament archaeology and culture, and numerous other resources.

Whatever path you choose in studying the New Testament, a greater knowledge of it will benefit you by enriching your knowledge of God and his word, helping you understand the scriptures that have informed our faith since the beginning.

Timeline of the New Testament

Scholars debate the exact chronology of the following events. The dates proposed below are based on my own calculations. For helpful resources, see Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (2nd ed.) and Andrew E. Steinmann, *From Abraham to Paul*.

Note: the abbreviation “c.” is short for *circa* (Latin, “approximately”).

3/2 B.C. Jesus born

1 B.C. Herod the Great dies

A.D. 10 Jesus found in the temple (Luke 2)

A.D. 14 Augustus dies; Tiberius becomes emperor

A.D. 26 Pontius Pilate becomes governor of Judaea

A.D. 29 The ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus begin

A.D. 33 The Crucifixion (April 3)

A.D. 36 Pontius Pilate recalled to Rome; martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7);
conversion of Paul (Acts 9)

A.D. 37 Tiberius dies; Caligula becomes emperor

A.D. 40 Conversion of the household of Cornelius (Acts 10)

A.D. 41 Caligula assassinated; Claudius becomes emperor

A.D. 43 James son of Zebedee martyred at Jerusalem (Acts 12:1–2)

A.D. 43–49 Paul’s First Missionary Journey (Acts 13–14)

c. A.D. 48 The letter of James written

A.D. 49 Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)

A.D. 49–51 Paul’s Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:40–18:22)

c. A.D. 50 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Galatians written

A.D. 51–55 Paul’s Third Missionary Journey (Acts 18:23–21:17)

c. A.D. 53 1 Corinthians written

A.D. 54 Claudius poisoned; Nero becomes emperor

c. A.D. 54–55 2 Corinthians, Romans written

A.D. 55 Paul arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:26–36)

c. A.D. 55 Gospel of Mark written

A.D. 57 Paul sent to Rome for trial before Nero (Acts 27:1)

A.D. 58 Paul arrives in Rome (Acts 28:11–16)

A.D. 59 Gospel of Luke written

c. A.D. 59–60 Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon written

A.D. 60 Book of Acts written (close of Acts)

A.D. 62 James the Just martyred at Jerusalem

c. A.D. 62–63 1 Peter written

c. A.D. 64–65 2 Peter and Jude written

c. A.D. 65 Gospels of Matthew and John written; also 1 Timothy, Titus, and 1–3 John

A.D. 65–66 Peter martyred at Rome

A.D. 66 Great Jewish Revolt begins

c. A.D. 66 2 Timothy written

A.D. 67 Paul martyred at Rome

A.D. 68 Nero forced to commit suicide; Galba becomes emperor

c. A.D. 68 Hebrews and Revelation written

A.D. 69 The chaotic “Year of Four Emperors”: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian each serve in turn as emperor

A.D. 70 *1 Clement* written; Roman forces take Jerusalem and destroy the temple

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- ¹ George W. Houston, *Inside Roman Libraries*, 175
- ² *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, 64–84.
- ³ *Lives of Illustrious Men*, 9, 18.
- ⁴ *Church History* 3:39:6.
- ⁵ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* 1:226–227; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*
- ⁶ Eusebius, *Church History* 3:39:16
- ⁷ Larry Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*.
- ⁸ *Church History* 3:39:15.
- ⁹ Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, 7.
- ¹⁰ See Richard Bauckham, “John for Readers of Mark” in *The Gospels for All Christians*.
- ¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, ch. 8
- ¹² Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.
- ¹³ *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, ch. 18.
- ¹⁴ Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44.
- ¹⁵ 1 Clement 5:7b; Eusebius, *Church History* 2:22:1–8
- ¹⁶ *Lives of Illustrious Men*, 59.
- ¹⁷ *On Modesty*, 20
- ¹⁸ Eusebius, *Church History* 6:25:14.
- ¹⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20:9:1 [200].
- ²⁰ See Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians*
- ²¹ See David Trobisch, *Paul’s Letter Collection*.
- ²² 1 Clement 47:1–3.
- ²³ *Ibid.* 41:2–3.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.* 1:1.
- ²⁵ *Church History* 3:25:1–6 with 3:3:5–6.
- ²⁶ General Audience, August 3, 2011.

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